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AUTHOR Howards, Melvin
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ABSTRACT

A teacher educator describes his teaching experience in China and his finding that the Western behaviorist, alphabetic, linear mode of thinking has been widely adopted in education in that traditionally ideographic culture. The contrasting relationships of language, thought and behavior in the American and Chinese cultures is examined, and it is concluded that Chinese acceptance of alphabetic principles in education fit in with their need for control and certainty in their basically ambiguous world. It is proposed that the Chinese adopt alphabetic modes of thought and action for only those purposes for which they are uniquely effective and that will ultimately assimilate them so that they appear to be Chinese. It is further noted that alphabetic modes are pervasive in language teaching because of the emphasis on quantification in education, but that a trend away from fragmentation and linearity and toward ideographic, contextual learning is emerging in second language teaching pedagogy. (MSE)

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TEACHING IN CHINA: From Ideograph to Alphabet and Back

Melvin Howards, Ph.D Professor of Education, Northeastern University, Boston.
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I have chosen Marshall McLuhan's heuristic metaphor of language as technology and his closely related notion of the medium as the message as a focus of this paper, since I firmly believe it accurately describes the intimate and multiple relationships among language and culture. When I was invited to teach teachers and students in China in 1982, I felt I would finally be in an educational environment more suited to my non-Behaviorist, non-alphabetic concepts of teaching and learning. I believed McLuhan's concepts as portrayed in these two brief quotes:

> For the ideogram is an inclusive gestalt, not an analytic dissociation of senses and functions like phonetic writing. (87)

And I certainly agreed with this statement:

> ...only alphabetic cultures have ever mastered connected lineal sequences as pervasive forms of psychic and social organization. The breaking up of every kind of experience into uniform units to produce faster action and change of form...has been the secret of Western power over man and nature alike. (88)

The obvious distinctions drawn by McLuhan between alphabetic and ideographic systems as they influence thinking and behavior made me think that in the land of the ideograph my own lifelong principles of wholeness in teaching and learning, especially language teaching and learning, would be understood and accepted. The contrast between alphabetic modes of communication and thought in all realms of human activity and the ideographic mode would be reflected in educational thought and practice. Alphabetic, Behaviorist thought and practice deals with parts, with analysis, with measurement of individual acts or behaviors, while ideographic thought and practice, I theorized with McLuhan, would be much more wholistic, integrated, and total. After a year and a half of teaching teachers

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and prospective teachers of English in China at the Branch College of the Beijing Foreign Language Institute (now called Beijing Foreign Language Teacher Training Institute) it became perfectly clear that the alphabetic mode of thought and practice in education, particularly the training of teachers of English in China, was dominant. It was also clear to me that McLuhan never taught in China!

My own direct experience was compared with that of others also teaching teachers of English (and other subjects as well), and it was unanimous that the alphabetic modes of thought controlled educational theory and practice at all levels in the schools in China, much as they do in the United States and most of the rest of the world. Behaviorist, alphabetic media carry the message of parts, fragments of language or information, of linearity, of repetition and drill of isolated elements, and considerable emphasis on rote memory and literal recall.

In keeping with this alphabetic mode, classrooms were teacher-centered and subject-centered. The EFL materials were for the most part outdated (early 1960's), largely British, and totally irrelevant to Chinese life, thought and society. Workbooks and texts filled with trivial dialogues no normal speaker would ever engage in, short reading selections about uninteresting events and activities followed by isolated vocabulary activities (mainly memorization of words with one meaning for each), plus one dimensional literal recall questions. Classroom practice that I observed and others I heard of involved almost no discussion, no interpretive activity, no real thinking about what was read or presented in class. Very bright, conscientious, extremely well motivated teachers and students I knew were forced into alphabetic, Behaviorist patterns of thought. My students loved what they called "hard" courses, by which they meant subjects filled with facts and formulas; teaching them about language teaching or teaching them literature was a constant struggle between the literal renditions they gave back and my insistence on more figurative interpretation. When I probed for understanding of a short story or of an article or chapter in a text, I normally got back factual and verbatim accounts, or literal restatements. Rarely did I get interpretation and not only was that rare due to certain obviously political concerns, but it occurred because of the typical approach to teaching and learning.

These practices in China in 1982 and 1983, which probably have not changed yet, are very much like those in America for most of this century, not excluding

the present. Somehow the alphabetic, Behaviorist modes of thought and action in education have conquered the world particularly in the field of language teaching. Many EFL and other language teachers still cling to the discredited and disproved notion that language is learned by repetition, imitation, drill, rote memory of grammatical rules and pronunciation practices in meaningless dialogue and the like.

This massive contradiction of the alphabetic mode of thinking in education in the home of the inclusive, gestaltist ideograph requires discussion and amplification. We need to delve more deeply into aspects of language teaching and learning, curriculum, and the culture that spawns them all. Why has Western Behaviorism, rooted in our alphabetic culture, been so readily accepted in ideographic China? It is imperialism of the mind; it is the "conventional wisdom" that fragments, limits, and controls.

The ultimate question here is: Having worked from ideographic to alphabetic modes of thought and practice in education in China, can we get back to the source? Can we go from alphabetic to ideographic in language teacher training in the United States?

A. Language and Culture

Let's start with the relationships of language, thought and behavior. Steiner (80) paraphrases Leibniz's idea in the 1960's that "language is not the vehicle of thought but its determining medium; that thought is language internalized. We think and feel as our particular language impels us to do." In America one of the leading linguists of all time, Benjamin Whorf, said in this connection:

> And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness. (in Steiner, 89)

The sense of the wholeness of language is well stated by Lenneberg:

> The linguistic development of utterances does not seem to begin by a composition of individual, independently movable items but as a whole tonal pattern...Perceptually, the child reacts also to whole patterns rather than to small segments...It points to a fundamental principle in language acquisition: what is acquired are patterns and structure, not constitituent elements. (20,21 Question of Competence)

Thus, even in alphabetic languages, learning occurs in contexts and in wholes not in bits and pieces, sound by sound, letter by letter, word by word. R. Brain, a neurologist who has studied aphasics and alexics, underscores the quality of wholeness in all language learning and use even among those with major neurological impairments. He says:

> This leads naturally to the fact that a word is perceived as a whole which is something different from the sum of its parts... a word is an organization of a higher order than the units of which it is constructed, and that the organization of these units which follow one another in time actually modifies the perception of the units themselves...(in Language-p. 318-19)

Along the same line Piaget said:

> We are bound to admit how well founded are the descriptions given by Gestalt psychology. The essential "wholeness" of mental structures (perceptual as well as intelligent), the existence of the "good Gestalt" and its laws,...are justified by so many experimental studies that these concepts have acquired the right to be quoted throughout contemporary psychology. In particular, the method of analysis that consists in always interpreting facts in terms of a total field is alone justifiable, since reduction to atomistic elements always impairs the unity of reality.
> (141-Question of Competence)

Thus, even in our alphabetic language the learning and the influence of it on us is wholistic--ideographic. Language learning and teaching must be seen in a much more inclusive Gestaltist frame of reference rather than in the reductionist Behaviorist mode which so dominates language teaching in China and in most of the rest of the world.

The issue really is: Is language, any language, merely a collection of sounds and symbols arranged in some particular order to which we assign specific meanings and uses? Or is language to be understood much more comprehensively as the authors quoted do?

Ideographs are expansionist in nature, returning to McLuhan's basic metaphor, and alphabets are reductionist. The ideographic languages are much more wholistic and global in their form and in the type of response they evoke from their users. Ideographic languages seem to have developed from pictographic forms like the hieroglyph. Pictographic forms evoke in us, as do pictures and paintings, many different cognitive and affective responses simultaneously, while alphabetic languages evoke more abstract and remote responses since we respond to meaningless letters which reproduce meaningless sounds according to McLuhan. The word is not the thing, but the ideograph and the pictograph are much closer to the thing represented than the meaningless letters of alphabetic codes.

There are significant differences between Chinese and English other than their symbolic forms. These include the fact that Chinese is parataxic and English is not. A parataxic language like Chinese places phrases and clauses one after another without coordinating or subordinating conjunctions. This clearly marks the difference between English and Chinese as one of logical relations normally signaled by coordination or subordination in the linear fashion we are so familiar with. Chinese logic is very different from ours and this is one indicator of that important difference. Our more linear syntax and logic are less ambiguous usually, hence more rapid and efficient in the way in which McLuhan described the process earlier.

Another difference is that in Chinese tense and gender are less well defined and specified than in English.

Alphabetic languages contain numerous tense forms dividing time into uniform units and they regularly use coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. The fact that we are so bound, we speakers of English and other alphabetic languages, by time and considerable detail in our normal communication, is a confirmation of

McLuhan's notion that alphabet users break their experience and knowledge down into small parts, pieces, fragments in terms of information, thought, feelings. These are some of the psychic reverberations of the alphabetic medium. There are others, for example, Chinese painting historically has been impressionistic-ideographic, whereas much Western painting has been representational or remotely abstract. Prior to the Revolution, many Chinese accepted the inclusive world view of Buddhism, while in the alphabetic cultures of the West Christianity has been much more dominant with its emphasis on the individual. The Chinese I knew, and those we have all read about, are devoted to their families, their neighborhoods, their cities, towns, villages, their country--the Motherland, while in the West we tend to be devoted more to the individual in most aspects of our lives. The Chinese often commented negatively and almost incomprehensibly at our ability to act on our own, live on our own, be much more concerned with our individual goals, beliefs, etc.

All of this, and more, can be traced to the pervasive psychic and social influences of the language systems used by our two different cultures.

How does this relate to our current perplexities about why it is that the ideographic Chinese resort to alphabetic modes of thought and action in education, while remaining true to their ideographic mentality in most of the rest of their lives? Historically, Chinese society has been controlled and restricted and except for a small elite, exclusive. The name Middle Kingdom was a statement to the world that China was the center of the universe so it had little or nothing to do with most of the world most of the time. Walls have encircled every village and city, excluding the outsider and incarcerating the insider within the close extended family, the community groups which control each other's behavior. They still do. Chinese society from the Tang dynasty (and before) to the Tunic dynasty of the day maintain many of the same notions. They believe that there is a qualitative difference between Chinese and Wai Guo ren--outside people.

Chinese acceptance of alphabetic, Behaviorist educational principles and practices fit in with their need for control and certainty in their basically ambiguous world. Information is hard to come by in China--information about almost everything; it is under strict control and is used to maintain control. Also, the Chinese are rapidly changing their economy at all levels in revolutionary fashion and this requires Western assistance in technology and in all forms of production and distribution of goods and services. This infusion of Western alphabetic modes of thought and action are uniquely effective for

such purposes. The Chinese will accept alphabetic modes for these purposes, but will absorb them, assimilate them, so that they will appear Chinese at some point in the not too distant future. We shall see the unity of opposites so characteristic of Chinese thought.

Even though the appearance of alphabetic modes of thought and action in education in China seem contradictory, they fit into the historical pattern for them.

B. Teachers and Learning

Why has so much language teaching been alphabetic, Behaviorist in nature everywhere? In large part this is due to the emphasis on the objective, the measurable, the "scientific" in all matters educational which has appealed to many educators who apparently hoped to steal status from the "hard" sciences by such action. After all, how can anyone be taken seriously who is not scientific?

The work of Pavlov, Thorndike, Skinner, Hull, Guthrie and others seemed to have managed the transfer of hard scientific methodologies to the "soft" social sciences, especially education. The idea that human learning and behavior could be identified specifically, measured precisely and then predicted was extremely tempting. Such apparently precise measurements offered many educators a sense of security and control.

Not only educators were lured by these promises of certainty, but many early linguists were also attracted by the various mathematical models and other abstract concepts largely Behaviorist in nature. Chomsky took some of the wind out of their sails with his extensive critique of Behaviorist concepts of language learning and development. His basic point that language is not imitative and repetitive, but rather is creative and transformational wounded, but did not destroy, the Behaviorist language theorists and practitioners. It is not surprising that people with minimal and/or inappropriate training and education in EFL or ESL would be so susceptible to the attraction of alphabetic, Behaviorist methods and materials of instruction. Most of the materials are easy to use, requiring little more than the ability to read the textbook scripts provided by the publisher. Freudenstein (GURT '83-p. 188-89) reports on a symposium in Switzerland in 1979 in which Pinthon reported that: "It covers a wide range of persons: from the dedicated housewife and mother to the professionally trained teacher." Freudenstein (1982) did his own survey and found that in

West German institutions of adult education and in the Federal Republic of Germany as well as in many industrial firms in Europe:

> No single firm insisted on the properly trained professional teacher. An imaginative native speaker who is able to motivate his language students ranks as high as a university graduate in languages and linguistics. (190)

This phenomenon certainly was true in a number of schools I knew in China. How valuable is the linguistics training many university graduates get for actual classroom teaching? Not terribly in my experience in China and at my own and other universities. So often the linguistics training provides its students with a technical vocabulary and highly abstract concepts of language structure and functions which have no direct relationship to ordinary communication or to curriculum.

Linguistic instructional materials are typically mechanical skills activities including nonsense words, and little or no meaningful content. Many of my own Chinese students and teachers knew all of the grammatical forms, structures and terms but could not write very well, nor speak very well, nor get beyond the most literal level of understanding the language.

As to learning we must inquire what is its basic nature? Is it truly as the Behaviorists describe it or as the cognitive psychologists describe it? Perhaps both are involved in learning, but as we noted earlier, the leading students of language and learning like Piaget, Chomsky, Lenneberg, Steiner, Whorf, among others, see language and language learning as whole, rather than as a collection of parts and pieces. If wholeness does indeed describe language learning and development then that can be a guide for us. The dominant Behaviorist, alphabetic curricula clearly do not meet all the needs of all language learners or teachers.

What is the purpose of language? The dictionary tells us what common sense has always told us: that language is used and needed to "make common" thoughts, ideas, feelings, desires, needs to another person. Making common means to make understandable and meaningful. How do we make things understandable and meaningful? By establishing some type of relationship among words, ideas, concepts. Our curriculum and the materials used in it should reflect this emphasis on wholeness and integration of skills and content. True understanding of a language requires knowing more than one meaning of many words and knowing more than

one way to express an idea.

Teaching and learning language are all children of the culture which produces them. We know that every language shapes its users thoughts, feelings and thinking in innumerable ways. We have seen that language is an organismic entity alive, whole, integrated and ever-changing very much like the humans who use it and are used by it. This directs us to consider what kind of teachers and what kind of curriculum for language teaching can we devise which will emphasize wholeness, meanings?

What of teachers? Wilga Rivers (GURT '83-331) wants them to have knowledge of literature, history, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, politics, economics, etc. She criticizes the narrowness of training of teachers of EFL and the contradiction that: "Most instructors are formed to teach literature and do in fact teach language." (337)

Most EFL or TESL teachers do not have a broad academic or pedagogical background; many have taken courses in various kinds of linguistics but none in curriculum development other than the typical alphabetic, Behaviorist types. Here are some other views on teachers and their training. Eisner says:

> ...the idea that the skills of teaching can be treated as discrete elements and then aggregated to form a whole reflects a fundamental misconception of what it means to be skilled in teaching. What skilled teaching requires is the ability to recognize dynamic patterns, to grasp their meaning, and the ingenuity to invent ways to respond to them...simply possessing a set of discrete skills ensure nothing." (in GURT-83/ALTMAN)

Altman (GURT '83) makes a similar point:

> Much of the literature of language teacher training looks at and analyzes language teaching primarily as a configuration of identifiable and learnable technical skills and knowledge...The "whole" of language teaching equals far more than the sum of the discrete technical skills which teachers learn in methods courses." (p. 22)

Clearly, many teachers are only being trained to work within the comfortable, predictable borders of Behaviorist, alphabetic thinking and planning. This is what perpetuates the so-called "conventional wisdom" which is reductionist in nature.

Not only has teacher training been dominated by the same lock-step thinking we have seen in linguistically based instructional programs and curricula, but most research in the field has also been poured into the same Behaviorist mold. The Goodmans put it well (HER-330, '77):

> We believe that too much research on language and language learning has dealt with isolated sounds, letters, word parts, and even sentences. Such fragmentation, although it simplifies research design and the complexity of the phenomena under study seriously distorts processes, tasks, cue values, interactions, and realities."

A final note on methods of teaching comes from Krashen (GURT '83) whose basic concept of the Input Hypothesis says: "We acquire language by understanding messages or obtaining comprehensible input..." he continues:

> ...neither drill nor conscious grammar methods provide much comprehension input, while newer methods provide a great deal of it, with considerable extralinguistic support to aid comprehension...The Input Hypothesis similarly accounts for the success of immersion programs. They work because they supply large amounts of comprehensible input via comprehensible subject matter teaching. (259)

Not only the immersion program which uses subject matter as the context of language teaching and learning but the Natural approach of Terrell and much of Finochiarro's work all insist that language teaching and learning should be realistic and contextual rather than fragmented and stilted. More emphasis is placed by these newer approaches on context, meaning and relevant content, rather than on isolated skills practice and drills.

This slight shifting from strict alphabetic, Behaviorist principles and practices in EFL/ESL to more ideographic, wholistic ones is promising for the field. The trend away from so much isolated activity, drill, content, requires at least two additional steps to insure a significant change in teacher training and teaching: 1). improved teacher education that must include more work in the psychology of learning-cognitive brand, more work with curriculum planning and development that goes beyond merely choosing texts and workbooks, and carefully supervised practical experiences with students of various ages and backgrounds; 2) curriculum revision that places meaning and relevance in the center of all language teaching and learning and that can only occur when the medium of instuction--the curriculum--is whole, integrated, ideographic. The content of instruction must emphasize relationships and all of the language skills need to be inserted into the meaningful content under study. No more isolated skills and no more senseless, fragmented contents. This is how we shall complete the cycle I identified in my title: From ideograph to alphabet and back.

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